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of Walt W. Rostow

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W W Rostow

Donor

March 24, 1981

Date

D. M. R. King

Archivist of the United States

April 21, 1981

Date

FOREWORD

1. The copyright in this transcript has been retained by WALT W. ROSTOW. To facilitate the research use of the interview it has been decided that persons wishing to publish short quotations from this transcript do not have to obtain the permission of either WALT W. ROSTOW or the John F. Kennedy Library. While a precise and consistently applicable definition of "short quotations" is impossible, it should be understood that the allowable length of a published excerpt is similar to that which is commonly permitted under the legal doctrine of "fair use" of material that is protected by statutory copyright. The Kennedy Library will provide assistance on this matter to researchers, and their editors and publishers.
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I would say this is a most compassionate man. People generally did not believe it or understand what I meant. And perhaps compassion isn't quite the right word - although it's almost right. But he did have an extraordinary ability to see inside the mind of another man; and see his mind and situation not only with objectivity but with real sympathy.

This, of course, was one of the strands which makes him a Lincolnesque figure - the other being his combination of humor and sense of the possibility of tragedy.

But my point here is that he understood Khrushchev's position over Berlin. He knew that the drain could not continue; that something like the Wall would be built; and he would have to sit still for it.

Neustadt: I ask this for two reasons. One is that I am curious to get your views about his learning and anticipation processes. Now clearly this has probably uncovered a real important clue here because he could look ahead in terms of the Russians--because he could think about what would I be thinking if I were Khrushchev. Now one of the things I have never been clear about and I would like your thoughts - he did not take the Cuban confrontation nearly as I can tell as the Walter Lippmanns take it - as now let us put aside the threat of confrontations. Above all he was deeply concerned about the possibilities of miscalculation, mutual miscalculation. I don't think he thought he had seen the end of this.

Rostow: That is what he talked about with Mikoyan when he came to Washington after the crisis. Kennedy focused the conversation on exactly that point. He said, in effect: look, this is an awfully dangerous world. I didn't think you would do this; and you obviously didn't think I would react as I did. This is too dangerous a way for us to go on.

Neustadt:

Neustadt: Well, my question is do you have any notion of what he was looking ahead towards in terms of the next moments of difficulties with the Soviets, what he foresaw. He foresaw the Wall all right - now what was he foreseeing in November of 1963?

Rostow: That is a good question and I don't think I can answer it. I think he knew that obviously his next big one was Southeast Asia and China. He always regarded the Chicom nuclear explosion as likely to be historically the most significant and worst event of the 1960's. And Saigon had gone bad between June and November 1963 - and he knew it. He had silted it up some from the end of 1961 to June 1963; but it was coming unstuck. That was perfectly obvious after the Buddhist affair, and what followed.

Whether he foresaw that pressures would arise for German unity, whether his speech at the Free University in Berlin reflected such an anxiety - whether there was something in that area, I don't know. I think there is no doubt that round about the end of 1961 he began to cheer up a little about things. Of course, he never gave himself the breaks; he was never overoptimistic in terms of the rhythm of his Administration. But in 1962 in the Berkeley speech one could see the first public reflection of a sense that we had ceased to slip back. Arthur Schlesinger called me up before that speech. He said the President wants to talk about the need for enlarged European contributions to aid. I said that is not a good enough subject for the occasion. Why doesn't he talk about the slow, favorable turn in the tide. Arthur asked for a draft. The President later approved the theme and used it. The preface to his 1962 papers places that year as a turning point. The missile crisis was, of course, the centerpiece. But the change in mood came earlier. He cheered up some. I have the feeling that, after the Cuba missile crisis, some of the dark, dark

feeling

feeling he had on the nuclear business began to lift a little. All through 1961, right down to the Cuba missile crisis, he had to bear the inhuman burden of making deterrence stick. He knew the only way you could make it stick was to face - literally face - the possibility of nuclear war. You had to take steps which actually could take you there: on Berlin; in the Cuba missile crisis; and, more obliquely, over Laos in 1961. And I had the feeling sometimes, as he sat there in the Cabinet Room listening to us talk of moves that could lead to nuclear war, he was haunted a little by the possibility that the good Lord had put him on earth to destroy it. I talked shortly after his death one night with Mrs. Shriver. The burden of nuclear responsibility came up. I asked her whether she had the feeling that the President's life was shadowed by this burden. She said he did fear he was going to be the instrument for doing this horrible thing. There is little doubt in my mind that this was, for him, a real and deeply personal anxiety. But, in the period after the Cuba missile crisis, this cloud lifted somewhat. It didn't go away, but it lifted.

Neustadt: But he didn't share this Lippmannian ebullience until it was all over?

Rostow: No. Because he knew what he had done. He had set Khrushchev on his behind. The only way that Khrushchev became a nice, clean-cut kid - interested in the test ban - was by making it clear to him that nuclear blackmail wouldn't work. That is what Kennedy did. But he knew that Khrushchev was capable of taking the world that close to nuclear war, and he - or his successors - might do it again. That is why he said what he did to Mikoyan. Then he waited his moment to make his American University speech.

Neustadt: Well, the other reason for raising this point now is what kind of anticipatory mechanism - is something very close to your heart. BNSP - my perception is that he was never going to sign that BNSP. He never

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Neustadt: This raises two things. The President made a conscious effort in the early days of the Administration to smother the Vice President with kindness, it was conscious I am sure, and also to avoid the kind of gap that existed between Roosevelt and Truman. In the case of Cuba of all the testimony about the impacts of everything on everybody I have never heard any on the impact of this whole thing on the present President.

Rostow: He spoke about it the other day.

Neustadt: Did he?

Rostow: Yes.

Neustadt: He was a spectator sportsman through this.

Rostow: Well, he came out of it with long thoughts. I can tell you something interesting about that. President Johnson, before his first State of the Union message, had a session over there to which I was invited. It was a fascinating occasion. There were McNamara, Rusk, Taylor, and the old gang: Ted Sorensen, Mac Bundy, myself, etc. There was the new staff - Valenti, Moyers, etc. And there also brought to the Cabinet table were three of his old pals outside the government - Clark Clifford, Jim Rowe and Abe Fortas. There we all were, like geological layers out of his life. President Johnson did something I thought was admirable. He talked from simple notes for damned near two hours about the things that were deep in him, how he looked at the world; how he looked at the United States; what he wanted to do. I have notes on it and I am glad; because it was a great occasion. At the end he said: now it is up to you fellows to write it down; but this is what I stand for. At one point he said: Now there are a lot of you fellows around the table who shared in the Cuba missile crisis. Some of you didn't. But I want to tell you that one of the deepest things in me is the memory of going to bed

at night

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Rostow: I think it came out of the perception of this man in Vienna who tried to snow him. It was a man who was confident, pretty confident that he was going somewhere in the face of Kennedy. He knew that Khrushchev was putting on a big act; but he also knew he had some conviction and ambition and drive behind him. Now it was obvious in a number of ways Kennedy had taken him down a peg over the year and a half that followed between Vienna and the Cuba missile crisis - year and three or four months. What Kennedy had in mind was that this fellow was intent on maintaining his power and status - and unwilling to take defeat from Kennedy. He interpreted his willingness to do this quite wild and improbable thing of putting the missiles in Cuba as a sign of the desperation of this man as he saw his position sagging away. He had a sense that a guy in that position - taking a desperate unexpected act to retrieve a waning situation - was a fellow you had to deal with damned carefully or he might explode.

Neustadt: This goes back to your other comment.

Rostow: He met this fellow and he had been wrestling with him from the time he had said in Vienna it is going to be a cold winter. He explained to him that he, Kennedy, could not take a shift in the balance of power. Well, here was this fellow willing to try to produce a shift in the balance of power, despite what Kennedy told him. Now a guy who would do that was in fact taking high risks; and Kennedy's job was to defeat him - but to defeat him in ways that minimized the chances that, in the course of his defeat, he would do something even wilder.

Neustadt: Well, now did Kennedy's terribly careful effort to retain his own control over his own machine just grow out of his sense of Khrushchev's position or does this relate to another kind of perception?

Rostow:

Rostow: I think it was a fellow in a time of desperate crisis reverting to his most natural style. He ran that show just the way he ran the campaign of 1960 or he ran his PT-boat headquarters.

Neustadt: Or the 72 hours against Roger Blough.

Rostow: Exactly. He just took it into his hands, like a small unit commander, going back to Elspeth's comment about our all being junior officers of the Second World War.

The style in which the Cuba missile crisis was organized is worth a lot of attention. It was like nothing else I had ever seen in this town. It exactly fitted Kennedy's instinctive style which was one of personal and intimate command. It was quite unlike the organization of a supreme headquarters in war. It was like the organization of a small military unit in operations. The town was never so light on its feet before or since. The President used his key Cabinet members and advisers as a personal staff. The whole town collapsed into two levels. You had the men around the Cabinet table; and the rest. I was one of the links between the two as chairman of the Planning subcommittee of the NSC Executive Committee.

Neustadt: Well one of the things that fascinates me about this is it had a precursor in Truman's consultations from June 25-28, 1950 in which the principals were used as their own staff. It didn't last long - it wasn't as tightly organized and I cannot sort out in my head how much of this is simply Kennedy's instinct for small unit operations and how much of it is inherent in the supreme situations. The way he handled these two - and in the clutch the President grabs for the men with operation responsibility and authority and they do their own staff work and the rest of the town sits. It is extraordinary.

Rostow: That's right.

Neustadt:

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Neustadt: Let's come back to the Turkish bases because historically - given a lot of views in the Pentagon which were given in the historical record - it is important to all of us for a few minutes. The President had earlier on ordered that the Jupiters be taken out of there - apparently out of a perception that they could complicate his life - on this miscalculation business. It was something else to have to think about.

Rostow: That, plus the pressure from the Hill. There was the survey of the Joint Atomic Energy Committee. It was properly anxious about the looseness of control around those bases which, by 1962, contained obsolescent weapons. The President ordered the Pentagon to get the Thors and Jupiters out of Britain, Italy, and Turkey. We moved with the British; but neither the Pentagon nor the State Department had gotten on with the diplomacy of getting them out of Turkey and Italy. It was a combination of inertia in the face of an awkward task and one of those occasions when the bureaucracy thought it was wiser than the President. And when he found himself in the missile crisis he feared the Russians would attack those bases and he would have to respond on an issue where he could not act with great conviction, given the history of the affair. He had a sense of conscience about this. He really wanted to get them out. But when the crunch came, at the end of the week, he firmly excluded using the Turkish bases for bargaining. And he was right; because, whatever the history, the use of our allies' weapons as bargaining counters -

to reduce

to reduce the weight on us during a crisis - would have terribly damaged the Alliance.

Neustadt: If the crisis had lasted another week - he was making his insistence immediate as I understand - by the Saturday.

Rostow: By Saturday, however, we were within hours of going in and taking out the missiles from the air.

Neustadt: That's right.

Rostow: If they attacked the Turkish bases I don't know what we would have done; but we would have already dismantled the Cuba missiles with air power. It was dangerous at the end of the week. Khrushchev held out to see if he could still bargain for something.

It

It produced the third crisis of the week. The first centered on the ship-turnaround; the second, on stopping construction; and the third, on dismantling the missiles. We got home almost free: almost because some Europeans still had the notion that we had some sort of implicit deal with the Russians. But, in fact, we did separate the tracks. And we substituted more nuclear power in the Mediterranean than we removed. But the President said, in effect: "God damn it, never again, never again; I won't be pinned down by these dangerous, obsolescent bases."

Neustadt: I think his concern was, if they clobber these, I have to do something. It reduces my freedom of action.

Rostow: That is right. But what really reduced our freedom of action was not the Turkish bases - it was that we lead an Alliance. And my guess is that his anger arose from the fact that his order had not been executed. In a difficult moment he had an unnecessary complication.